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978-1-107-01764-1 - Children's Peer Talk: Learning from Each Other

Edited by Asta Cekaite, Shoshana Blum-Kulka, Vibeke Grøver and Eva Teubal

Excerpt

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*Part I*

Introduction

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## 1 Children's peer talk and learning: uniting discursive, social, and cultural facets of peer interactions: editors' introduction

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*Asta Cekaite, Shoshana Blum-Kulka,  
Vibeke Grøver and Eva Teubal*

In school and out of school, both in traditional and modern societies, children of all ages spend extended periods of time in dyadic, multi-party, mixed-age or same-age interactions with their peers. While there is a long history of research on children's peer relations and friendships and their impact on child development (Ladd 2009), the study of peer talk from language and discursive perspectives, with a focus on peers as a discourse community, is relatively new (Ervin-Tripp and Mitchell-Kernan 1977; McTear 1985; Goodwin 1990; Grøver Aukrust 2001; Kyratzis 2004). The present book deploys a specific kind of lens to examine what is happening in naturally occurring peer talk and the potential impact of such talk on socialization and learning. One of its basic premises is the understanding that children's language and pragmatic development is a socioculturally, spatially and temporally situated process in which the child is not alone but is part of a communicative community, that is, a community of practice (Wenger 1998; Nelson, this volume).

The current perspective synthesizes insights from earlier contextually sensitive approaches to children's language and pragmatic development (primarily in adult-child encounters) and explores the learning potentials that characterize children's peer group interactions. A long tradition of research on adult-child interactions has yielded a wealth of information on the effects of this discourse on language learning within the domains of words and grammar (e.g., Nelson 1973; Bates, Bretherton, Snyder 1988), children's development of pragmatic skills (Ochs and Shieffelin 1979; Schiefelbusch and Pickar 1984; Ninio and Snow 1996), conceptual development (Nelson 2007; Rogoff et al. 1993) and on children's discursive socialization into the cultural practices of the community (Ochs 1988; see also Duranti, Ochs and Shieffelin 2012). The developmental research on both first and second language learning has mostly relied on observational data on dyadic intergenerational interactions (Gallaway and Richards 1994; Ninio and Snow 1996, but see Blum-Kulka and Snow 2002; de León 1998 on multi-party discourse) or controlled experimental data (e.g., Bialystok 2001; Hickmann 2003), tracking children's developmental discursive paths.

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Concurrently, linguistic anthropologic studies of children's natural peer talk, being primarily interested in cultural structures rather than the developmental aspects of children's discourse, have unveiled a host of child-culture-specific interactional patterns in a rich gamut of social practices and genres (Heath 1983; Ochs 1988; Schieffelin 1990; Blum-Kulka 1997; Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1989).

The present book extends this body of research, arguing that children's peer group activities contribute to their socialization in ways that usefully complement the role of adult-child interactions. It emphasizes the need to account for the role of peer activities, and the importance of the peer group and peer cultures in children's everyday experiences. The interest in analyzing children as a discourse community stems from and aligns with the particular place children have gained as a social and cultural group that deserves attention in its own right (Goodwin 1990; Corsaro 2005). The specific contribution of the book is a theoretical conceptualization of children's peer talk and its facilitative potential for children's language and pragmatic/discursive learning. By focusing on the processes of learning through using language in social practices with peers, it emphasizes the need to account for the role of peer activities, and the importance of peer group cultures in children's activities. The book's focus is mainly on the potentials and processes of learning as these appear on the micro-level within peer interaction. The observational methods used by several authors are geared toward capturing the dynamics of the interactive processes between peers in natural contexts and explicating learning processes and potentials by closely following children's discursive collaboration in situ, in a wide range of social and play activities. Hence the book's main emphasis is on the learning potentials and processes associated with language use in social practices with peers rather than on the outcome of such processes (for a discussion of the difference between process- and learning-outcome-oriented research, see Nelson, this volume).

The present volume builds on Blum-Kulka's theoretical view of peer talk as a "double-opportunity space" serving both as a locus for the co-construction of children's social worlds and peer cultures through interactional displays, and as an arena for the development of pragmatic skills in the first and second language (Blum-Kulka 2005a; Zadunaisky Ehrlich and Blum-Kulka 2010). From this perspective, the original notion of "opportunity space" (Ochs et al. 1989) is 'doubled' to promote a dialogue between diverse intellectual traditions by advancing the notion that peer talk functions simultaneously on two discursive planes. The first, mostly identified with the sociological/anthropological approach, is created *within* the social peer trajectory. On this plane, children dynamically negotiate meanings and relationships related to their local peer culture. On the second plane, mostly identified with the psycholinguistic, developmental approach, peer talk is viewed as a locus in which the dynamics

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of participation in various discursive events can create rich contextual opportunities for language and pragmatic development.

This book develops an interdisciplinary approach to childhood discourse and culture by drawing on educational, psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic and anthropological perspectives: children, both young preschoolers and preadolescents, are viewed as making sense of the world and co-constructing their unique child culture in the present of their childhood, while simultaneously engaging in interactional practices that can provide some of the stepping stones for discursive, social and cognitive development. Importantly, children's discursive activities are embedded within, and informed by, the communicative practices of the wider sociocultural community (including older peers, adults and institutional discourses).

From a discursive developmental perspective, peer talk is also characterized by a relatively egalitarian participation structure that is generally unavailable in adult-child discourse (e.g., Piaget 1995), and that thus allows for particular types of peer collaboration and discursive genres. For children, becoming full-fledged members of society, in which peer group interactions constitute a daily feature of life, necessarily entails engaging with a variety of interlocutors, taking on a wide range of communicative roles, and developing competences in a variety of conversational and discursive genres. It is because peer group interactions (within families, neighborhoods and classrooms) and their communicative practices (such as play frame negotiations, dispute and arguments, language play, story telling and explanations) constitute talk-based childhood cultures that becoming and acting as a member of a peer group involves becoming and acting as a competent member of these particular language communities.

The goal of the chapters in this volume is to describe a number of specific cases across a variety of cultural and educational settings – examining what participation in children's peer talk looks like, children's discursive practices, and the ways in which children can learn from them – and to promote a deeper understanding of how children can gain communicative, cognitive and social skills in various domains as they grow in the present of their childhood within the realm of their peer cultures. The chapters cover the domains of children's first language and extended discourse (literacy, argumentative, narrative events), as well as bilingual and second language encounters (L2 vocabulary acquisition, language play), highlighting the multifaceted learning affordances and possible drawbacks of these experiences. Several chapters examine in detail children's discursive practices and learning processes in peer group activities, while some adopt a longitudinal perspective, documenting the learning outcomes of peer discourse. We will now briefly introduce the theoretical and empirical underpinnings of the present approach and preface some of the issues that emerge.

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A significant feature of peer talk is its co-constitutive relation to the shared worlds of childhood culture, which serves as a major resource in cultural and relational work. Our approach to peer interactions and peer cultures builds on and is consistent with new sociologically informed theoretical approaches that have directed attention to children, their social worlds and talk, and peer cultures as being worth studying in their own right (Corsaro 2005, 2012). This interest in children's peer cultures is geared toward understanding the processes of cultural (re-)production in childhood from an emic point of view, namely, approximating as much as possible the children's own perspective. From this perspective, peer cultures are conceptualized as "a stable set of activities or routines, artifacts, values, and concerns that children produced and share in interaction with their peers" (Corsaro 2012: 10). Culture is seen as constituting and constitutive of interactional processes and social practices. Peer cultures, the unfolding childhood habitus, are shaped in and through children's participation in shared, discursively based, practices, that is, their common cultural and communicative landscape. However, to argue that children produce their own cultures is not meant to suggest that children's cultures are separate from the wider societal processes, adult practices (Corsaro 2005) and discursive resources. Rather, there is a dialectic, mutually informing, relation between children's and adults' cultures: it is through the process of "creative appropriation," "interpretive reproduction" and even "secondary adjustments" (e.g., subversive practices, Goffman 1967, cf. Blum-Kulka et al. 2004) that children explore, are socialized, and take their own stance on adult practices, and that they, over time, become part of a dynamically shaped adult culture, acquiring or transforming adult-like communicative competences and resources. Children in peer activities can be seen to both appropriate and reinterpret adult practices and resources in ways that make them peer specific (Zadunaisky Ehrlich and Blum-Kulka; Cekaite and Aronsson this volume).

*Children's peer discursive practices and socialization in peer group interactions*

One of the theoretical assumptions of the book is that peer culture has its own unique social routines, frames of interpretation and linguistic codes. As demonstrated by several chapters, peer-talk affordances are deeply embedded in relevant sociocultural structures of childhood, and they are tied to the shared discourse worlds of children in given age groups. Practices (symbolic play, cultural narratives such as stories, folktales) in cultural environments common to the preschool years carry developmental potentials by contributing to

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young children's "narrative consciousness," which is viewed as a discursive path to becoming members of cultural (adults' and children's) communicative communities (Nelson 2007: 212). For preadolescents, peer group sub-culture valued resources, such as sociolinguistic and affective contextualization cues, allow them to adopt and display desirable social, gender and ethnic identities (Evaldsson and Sahlström, this volume). Children thus rely on a variety of semiotic resources in their environment, verbal and non-verbal alike, to co-construct the sociocultural habitus unique to their social group; this habitus is created with the aid of children's deep involvement in the topics and flow of the ongoing discourse. Children's discursive activities are embedded within the constraints imposed by their level of linguistic-pragmatic development, owing to their age or their status as second language learners. Some of the discursive genres children engage in, like symbolic play, are typified by age-related specific formats, while others, like conversational story telling or argumentative discourse, partly echo adult-like discursive genres (Blum-Kulka 2005a; Blum-Kulka and Hamo, forthcoming).

Linguistic ethnography studies have demonstrated children's deep involvement in their shared worlds of childhood culture and their discursive socialization of each other into the social and moral orders (e.g., Goodwin 1990; Kyratzis 2004) through, for instance, calibrating gender-specific directives (see Goodwin 1990 on American, and Kyratzis and Guo 2001 on American and Chinese contexts) and through intricate play access routines (Cromdal 2001; Mor 2010). Among the wealth of peer genres, fantasy play, narratives, disputes and arguments have a solid place in young children's communicative and cultural landscapes (Danby and Theobald 2012). For example, in fantasy play, which is characterized by the joint construction of imaginary worlds, children embellish adult models of social life to fit their concerns and values through a process of "collaborative emergence" (Sawyer 1997, 2002). Collaborative emergence involves a certain amount of collaborative improvisation, that is, engagement with the "imaginative function of language" in their creation of distant, hypothetical, and connected fantasy worlds (Harris 2000), as well as their sensitivity to and expansion of each other's contributions and attuned poetic performance (see Sawyer 1997, 2002; Cekaite and Aronsson, this volume; Vardi-Rath et al., this volume). Importantly, such fine-tuned participation assumes and draws on children's close familiarity with the material, visual and verbal manifestations of childhood genres (Opie and Opie 1959), including adult-activity-based play 'scripts' such as 'shopping,' 'family,' or 'party' (see Sylva, Bruner and Genova 1976; Nelson 2007; also Kyratzis, this volume), as well as with the popular media textual resources that are widely distributed in society (Nicolopoulou et al., this volume). Children's talk is full of references to and repetitions and (subversive) recyclings of vernacular texts, songs, TV films and other popular media (Dyson 2003; Rampton 2006; Maybin 2006, this

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volume), as well as recyclings of institutional and adult-related activities and talk (Aronsson and Thorell 2002; Kyratzis 2007).

Thus, close studies of peer talk (such as those collected here) trace and demonstrate some of the ways in which young children's cultural resources and modes of interpretation can differ from those of adults. For instance, young children have their specific linguistic codes (like past tense verbs) to mark transition to the world of pretense (Blum-Kulka et al. 2004), they rely on a shared pool of resources, some loosely connected to scripts and characters prominent in popular culture and cultural narratives (e.g., book stories), to establish the thread of a collaboratively constructed pretend play (Vardi-Rath et al., this volume). Similarly, they can collaborate in complicated negotiations around various topics, like the commitment embedded in making a promise, the justification for sharing toys or artifacts of popular culture, or the proper way of enacting a character from a story, based on a set of shared knowledge and moral values (Zadunaisky Ehrlich and Blum-Kulka, this volume). It is this familiarity and children's shared evaluative stances (Du Bois 2007) that promote the achievement of intrinsic motivation and children's intersubjective engagement. Several studies in the book show the complex discursive practices through which the children attempt to overcome social and interactional constraints, preserving sociality despite overt disagreements and language difficulties (Cekaite and Aronsson; Monaco and Pontecorvo; Rydland, Grøver and Lawrence; Zadunaisky Ehrlich and Blum-Kulka, this volume).

Children's peer cultures are thereby inextricably related to their language-mediated socialization into particular kinds of culturally authorized evaluative practices and judgments about how to be and act in the world (Maybin 2006; Goodwin and Kyratzis 2012). These orientations and values in their turn guide and shape children's social positioning, identities and learning opportunities in everyday encounters.

*The contribution of social interaction to children's development and learning*

The theoretical underpinnings of the present approach to children's peer talk include developmental theories that acknowledge the importance of social interaction as a facilitating factor in children's development. Both Vygotsky's and Piaget's ideas are important in understanding this process. But while they both acknowledged social interaction, Vygotsky and Piaget made different assumptions about interactions with peers and with adults as frameworks for development.

Piaget (1995) viewed children's peer interaction as a fruitful social site for development because peer interactions are not hindered by the power and cognitive asymmetries of adult-child relations and because they allow for dialog

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and discussion. Owing to their more egalitarian characteristics, peer interactions promote and even maximize cognitive and conceptual conflict, which leads to cognitive change and a higher level of understanding, i.e., re-establishment of equilibrium (Blum-Kulka and Dvir 2010; Tartas, Baucal and Perret-Clermont 2010; Monaco and Pontecorvo, this volume).

In Vygotsky's view, it is through task-related verbal interaction with a cognitively and socially more competent actor that children appropriate skills – skills that later become internalized (Vygotsky 1986). The sociocultural perspective has also been evoked to explain the gains of peer interactions. The conceptualization of knowledge and skills as dynamic and situated provides for the flexible and relational character of expert–novice interactions. In this view, children can learn from each other, fluidly switching between expert and novice roles, because they operate within one another's proximal zones of development (Rogoff 2003; Bodrova and Leong 2007; Blum-Kulka and Dvir 2010; see also Monaco and Pontecorvo, this volume).

Sociocultural perspectives also emphasize the situatedness of learning and teaching encounters within the socially structured practices of peer groups, classrooms and families, all of which are interwoven in larger institutional and cultural frameworks (see Brofenbrenner and Ceci 1994; Hedegaard et al. 2012). The central position is that culture, linguistic discourse, narrative, conceptual knowledge and human cognition intersect and work together in children's participation in community life (Nelson 2007: 212), allowing for multiple developmental gains (e.g., perspective taking, social memory) as well as language and discursive learning. Understanding the outcomes of learning exchanges is therefore dependent on systematic consideration of the larger sociocultural context, societal ideologies and values within which interactions are embedded, and which inevitably structure their nature, meaning and impact, shaping both the participation structures and the availability of learning/teaching interactions. In this view, the benefits of peer discourse depend on multiple contextual factors, including children's age, gender, social class and ethnicity, and are inextricable from the ongoing construction of social positions and identities (Snow 1984; Willet 1995; Cekaite 2012).

#### *The differential roles of peers and adults in interaction*

The features that characterize adult–child and children's peer interactions are significant for our understanding of peer talk as an environment for development generally, and for children's language and discursive skills in particular. One of the core aspects of children's interactions with adults is the asymmetry in power, skills and knowledge, and children's interactions with peers might require different strategies of talk management compared with children's talk with adults, (cf. Grøver Aukrust 2004). When adults interact with young

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children, they tend to do most of the work, initiating and sustaining interaction and repairing breakdowns (Snow 1984; Ninio and Snow 1996). For instance, in family interactions, adults tend to elicit children's explanations and accounts, to support stories with prompts to get started, and to continue, clarify and explicate necessary background knowledge, in this way scaffolding children's talk toward the normative features of adult-like performance (Ochs et al. 1989; Grøver Aukrust and Snow 1998; Blum-Kulka 1997; Sterponi 2009). By way of contrast, peers might provide less support for conversations than adults do (McTear 1985), and in multi-party peer talk, children may need to work hard conversationally to get and keep their turns and speaker roles, thereby meeting the increasing demands of on-line planning (Blum-Kulka and Snow 2002). For instance, when children participate in pretense play, explanatory talk or narratives with peers (who may offer less conversational support and fewer interactional slots to fill in), they may volunteer and set themselves up as explainers or narrators (Grøver Aukrust 2004), using narratives not as factual accounts but as exemplifications and/or justifications for the organization of the emerging play (Küntay and Ervin-Tripp 1997).

In sum, adult-child conversations may offer conversational support and serve as models for adult-like pragmatic development and communicative participation, providing guidelines for culturally and cognitively appropriate conversational performance. However, adult scaffolding may also have a constraining effect on children's discourse: by making the communicative task easier, it may constrain children's investment in the communicative exchange (especially in genres characteristic of children's peer cultures, Pellegrini 2009). Moreover, the interactional ecology that children experience in their daily encounters with adults in formal/educational settings is characterized by marked asymmetry regarding the amount and character of talk. As demonstrated in a study of adult questioning in preschool settings in Great Britain, 94.5 percent of all questions asked were "closed questions that required a recall of fact, decision between a limited selection of choices, or no response at all," and only 5.5 percent were open-ended questions that exhibited a potential for sustained (shared) thinking and talk (Siraj-Blatchford and Mani 2008: 5). These findings reveal the need for an ecologically valid examination of the roles of peers and adults in children's discursive development, motivating socioculturally sensitive explorations of the learning affordances that characterize the conversational genres of children's peer cultures.

*Children's discursive literacy and extended discourse in first language interactions*

According to the present approach, peer talk may provide children with opportunities for gaining expertise in a wide range of discourse types, by, for